

SPEECH DELIVERED BY

JAMES H. BULLER

INDIAN AND ESKIMO EDUCATION

CONVENTION

ROYAL YORK HOTEL, TORONTO

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TO

DELEGATES OF THE CONVENTION ON INDIAN AND ESKIMO EDUCATION  
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It is most gratifying to know that the theme of this conference is "The Future of Indian Education" as it will no doubt prompt discussions which could lead to some exciting alternatives to the existing programs or suggestions to strengthen uncertainties of real concern.

As a layman, I suspect that I should focus my remarks on what the layman expects as possibilities in the future educational programs and policies of Indian people. My comments will be those of a non-professional and likewise a non-expert.

Having the privilege of serving as a trustee on an urban Board of Education for a number of years, I can offer some assurance that there are a few million people in Canada who are experts in the field of public education, or at least who have some pretty definite ideas on the matter. I also suspect that there must be a few million experts on Indian education - I can assure you that I am not. I do hope that those of you who might have been expecting an attack on the educational policies of the Indian Affairs Branch will not be too disappointed when I say that I am not qualified nor am I adequately up to date on the many innovations and new programs instituted by the department. If their reports and releases truly reflect the effort and progress being made, I have no compunction in expressing a

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It is rather frightening to realize that the year 1984, is only sixteen years away and if there is still a possibility that a world described by George Orwell might become a reality, then we must start on some serious planning right away. Of even greater alarm is the realization that the twenty-first century is less than thirty-three years ahead and that so many of the world's people, including Canada's Indians, are still not out of the eighteenth or nineteenth century in development. We are fast fading out of what the historians in years to come will classify as the "post modern era", yet the present contains all that there is.

As a trustee of public education, I am aware of the conflict that occurs with the realization that our school systems must conserve the values and purposes for which they were designed - stability, morality, tradition, etc., yet on the other hand, knowing that the pattern must be broken to keep pace with the ever changing environment and guarding against mental dryrot. I still fear that we are merely teaching a competency in yesterday's skills for a world that no longer exists.

In discussing the future there should be no necessity to shout all the old familiar slogans and expend a lot of precious energy on re-fighting yesterday's battles. This, unfortunately has been the pattern for too many years by both the Indian people and well intentioned sympathizers. Although there is a real need to create an awareness among the public to the sub-standard conditions which affect the lives of our native citizens, I firmly believe that more success can be achieved without shocking the public with feelings of guilt for errors of omission and commission made by early settlers and traders - not necessarily forefathers - 100 to 300 years ago.

The future for the Indian starts now and the tasks that lie ahead are challenging enough to command our maximum energy and talent if we are, in the least, interested. I hope that the power generated by this energy, this great revolution, will be for something meaningful instead of against everything and that attempts to regain all that which was lost will be devoted to the realization that full partnership in Canada's future is the answer. Only then will the Indians of today and tomorrow achieve the new Jerusalem - - this Heaven on earth.

Well, what about education? What role must it play in the attainment of the good life? I have a hunch that we must first start by re-emphasizing the dignity of the human person, at least here is a value that nearly all people understand and accept. This principle must prevail as one of the most important responsibilities of education and educators. Education has many functions and responsibilities, each quite valid, depending on the needs of society and the times.

As a layman, I look for some very practical means of achieving this first principle and the relationship between pupil and teacher is a good place to start.

Teachers generally come from middle class families and naturally direct their aspirations toward middle or upper class objectives. Generally, their biases in their relationship with their pupils are very often at variance with the socio-economic background of the Indian student. They quite naturally react more favourably to students who know how to stand and answer a question, say "please", "excuse me", are clean, blow their noses, and never get caught swearing. Really, the teacher is in a bit of a dilemma for by whose standards are judgements to be made. If he or she judges the

the child by personal standards, the disciplining is often too punitive and rigid; if she has too low an expectation of the child, the student will develop a low expectation of himself. It doesn't take too long before the pupil believes himself to be as inadequate as the school indicates that he is.

I rather suspect that teachers are not much more adaptable now than they were thirty or forty years ago. It is also recognized that the past and present teacher training programs are inadequate to meet the quality needs of today and tomorrow. It is comforting, however, to know that significant changes are being made in most provinces to improve and raise the standards of the teaching profession by phasing the training into a university degree course of studies. It is hoped that teachers planning to work in Indian communities and wishing to specialize in dealing with cross-cultural situations will also have opportunities for study and experience at all universities in Canada.

To teach in an Indian community effectively requires a high degree of professional competence and likewise the demands and results are equally rewarding. This is evidenced by the large number of qualified applicants for the few available teaching positions in the north. How extremely satisfying it must be in helping a child to achieve the human promise born in him, but thwarted and submerged through no fault of his own. It requires a great deal of respect for the child as a person and an unshakeable confidence in his ability to learn. There is truly a real need to understand the conflicts encountered by the culturally different and much more emphasis must be placed in providing facilities for teachers to acquire these special skills.

There is a need for more educational research in Canada and more qualified researchers. We are still relying very heavily on U. S. research

documents to provide the answers to many of the educational problems in Canada. It is, however, gratifying to find that we are, at last, beginning to contribute our share of significant information to the world supply of educational research. I believe we have a host of ideal situations for valuable studies in education on our Indian reserves and communities. These situations present ideal opportunities under controlled conditions to examine such topics as teaching English as a second language; problems encountered by the culturally deprived, non-graded schools; junior kindergartens; health and diet and its effect on achievement, etc. Indian educational institutions and integrated schools could be used to the limit of our resources and imagination.

The increased enrolment of Indian youth and adults in Vocational Training programs is most encouraging and every one who has the inclination for self development through these programs should have the opportunity. To the best of my observations, meaningful trades appear to be available and it is hoped that opportunities will be extended to those Indian people where needs are greatest, particularly in the remote areas of the north.

One of the areas in which we, as professional educators, lay educators, and the public, fail to take advantage of our God-given imagination, is in our failure to provide alternative educational opportunities in Vocational Training for the development of skills in the performing and fine arts. I suppose that over the years we have conditioned ourselves to the thought that education should prepare us for a life of good living instead of living a good life, and that failure to meet an adequate level of academic achievement doomed the student to Technical School. We have and still presume that providing a minimum of competency in shoe repair, hairdressing, welding, mechanics, and wood working, etc., will enable us to fulfill our major

responsibility. I wonder how many musicians, actors, dancers, painters, sculpturers are being lost to our already culturally depressed society. Surely children and young people whose talents and interests lie in the direction of the arts deserve the same opportunities for development through public education as do those who want, or are otherwise forced to be mechanics, tinsmiths, cooks, etc.

It is a well known fact that our Indian children have as much, if not more, sensitivity for the creative arts than non-Indian children, yet I do not know of any Indian person who is performing on the concert or theatrical stage as a recognized artist. Some consideration should be extended to this phase of education not only for the Indian but for all. We must not, however, overlook the first and foremost challenge of education - that of providing a meaningful program that will meet the needs of the economy of the area in which our native people live.

There is a great responsibility for all who are actively engaged in the educational programs of our native people to keep a very close watch on Adult Education in Indian communities. The gap between the educated youngsters and the uneducated adult is ever widening and in many instances leading to family breakdown, misunderstanding and suspicion. Indian adults must be kept up to date and aware of what is going on to enable them to assume more of the responsibilities in their own communities. I believe that we generally agree that public education is best when the community has some control over certain operational phases of the system, and to some degree, can determine what type of education is important to their children.

May I express a personal view on what appears to be a rumour of some certainty. Any decision on the part of the Federal authorities to transfer responsibility for education of Indian students to the province should be

carefully considered after consultation with the Indian people. I am thinking of Ontario particularly and the forthcoming reorganization of the present administration into fewer county boards. I fear that many of our Indian schools will be lost and forgotten in the concerns of larger community schools and representation on boards will not be so amply provided. With the involvement of the Indian Affairs Branch in education, the Indian people feel that, at least, someone is interested in them. At the very least I strongly urge the Provincial authorities to create a section within the Departments of Education, to assume some further responsibility for Indian education, - to co-ordinate and encourage research, - to develop cross-cultural training programs for teachers, - to develop more meaningful courses of study, - make recommendations for text book material, etc. This appointment would help bridge the gap that could develop as a result of a transfer and indicate to the Indian people that the interest and concern is there.

I know that one of the most difficult problems facing all of us is the unacceptable "drop-out" rate of Indian children from our schools. We can be pleased with the tremendous strides made in the past four or five years to encourage children to advance in their education, but I suspect that even with the increased enrolment in the primary grades, comparatively few are reaching high school or the undergraduate levels at university.

I firmly believe that a new approach is absolutely necessary.

Studies indicate that Indian children perform as well or above average in the earlier grades but appear to reach a difficult period around the 7th and 8th grades. It is at this point that the drop-out rate rises very sharply, according to the statistics available in the Branch's booklet "Facts and Figures". It is at this stage that alienation becomes a pattern

and there is no real effective identification with Indian heritage nor can the student effectively identify himself with a strange and often hostile white world facing him. The feelings of rejection, depression and anxiety which naturally come with adolescence reinforce the extremely crippling, negative self-image that he has, - he is without direction to his life and is therefore lost.

It is quite impossible to provide individual therapy to overcome these emotional problems caused by cultural conflict, but a great deal could be done on a group basis, such methods as are used by mental health clinics or addiction foundations. Because most of our Indian youth feel socially inadequate or alienated, a greater effort must be made to help them become better Indians. There is a need for a more effective awareness of their historical racial identity - this must be the basis of any future action. Our history courses reveal the struggles and accomplishments of early white settlers, but are meaningless to our Indian children because there is very little, indeed, for positive identification, and in most cases the major struggles and victories of the white settlers were against the Indian people. Some further emphasis must be placed on teaching the Indian youth what the Indian values are and why he acts as he does because of his Indianess. He needs to understand the values of the dominant society and the conflicts which emerge. He also needs to know the basic psychological principles of how to adjust to relieve the tensions and conflicts and stresses that result. He must be made to realize that he will never be anything but a human being and an Indian - that it is physically and psychologically impossible to be white. He must be made to realize that in taking the best from the two cultures, stirring these values within himself, he becomes a unique, precious

third kind of personality, enriching the society in which we live. He will then be able to face new and challenging struggles, which will make him more Indian than ever before.

Perhaps, what I have been attempting to say as a layman is that we are in the midstream of an exciting future, a time when problems should be considered as new opportunities and challenges, a time when years of good intentions should be put into action.



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